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Charles Homer Haskins  
Prize Lecture for 2015  
ACLS OCCASIONAL PAPER, No. 72

*A Life  
of Learning*  
WENDY DONIGER



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CHARLES HOMER HASKINS  
PRIZE LECTURE FOR 2015

*A Life of Learning*  
Wendy Doniger

ACLS OCCASIONAL PAPER, No. 72



The 2015 Charles Homer Haskins Prize Lecture was presented at the ACLS Annual Meeting in Philadelphia, PA, on May 8, 2015.

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## ON CHARLES HOMER HASKINS

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Charles Homer Haskins (1870–1937), for whom the ACLS lecture series is named, was the first chairman of the American Council of Learned Societies, from 1920 to 1926. He began his teaching career at The Johns Hopkins University, where he received the BA degree in 1887 and the PhD in 1890. He later taught at the University of Wisconsin and at Harvard University, where he served as dean of the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences from 1908 to 1924. At the time of his retirement in 1931, he was Henry Charles Lea Professor of Medieval History at the time of his retirement in 1931, and he served as president of the American Historical Association in 1922, and was a founder and the second president of the Medieval Academy of America (1926).

A great American teacher, Charles Homer Haskins also did much to establish the reputation of American scholarship abroad. His distinction was recognized in honorary degrees from Strasbourg, Padua, Manchester, Paris, Louvain, Caen, Harvard, Wisconsin, and Allegheny College, where in 1883 he had begun his higher education at the age of 13.

## HASKINS PRIZE LECTURERS

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2015	Wendy Doniger
2014	Bruno Nettl
2013	Robert Alter
2012	Joyce Appleby
2011	Henry Glassie
2010	Nancy Siraisi
2009	William Labov
2008	Theodor Meron
2007	Linda Nochlin
2006	Martin E. Marty
2005	Gerda Lerner
2004	Peter Gay
2003	Peter Brown
2002	Henry A. Millon
2001	Helen Vendler
2000	Geoffrey Hartman
1999	Clifford Geertz
1998	Yi-Fu Tuan
1997	Natalie Zemon Davis
1996	Robert William Fogel
1995	Phyllis Pray Bober
1994	Robert K. Merton
1993	Annemarie Schimmel
1992	Donald W. Meinig
1991	Milton Babbitt
1990	Paul Oskar Kristeller
1989	Judith N. Shklar
1988	John Hope Franklin
1987	Carl E. Schorske
1986	Milton V. Anastos
1985	Lawrence Stone
1984	Mary Rosamond Haas
1983	Maynard Mack

## BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF WENDY DONIGER

Wendy Doniger graduated from Radcliffe College and received her PhD from Harvard University and her DPhil from Oxford University. She has taught at Harvard, Oxford, the School of Oriental and African Studies at the University of London, the University of California at Berkeley, and, since 1978, at the University of Chicago, where she is the Mircea Eliade Distinguished Service Professor of the History of Religions in the Divinity School, the Department of South Asian Languages and Civilizations, and the Committee on Social Thought. In 1984 she was elected president of the American Academy of Religion, in 1989 a fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, in 1996 a member of the American Philosophical Society, and in 1997 president of the Association for Asian Studies. She was a member of the ACLS Board of Directors from 1994-99. She holds seven honorary degrees (one from Harvard). In 1986 she was awarded the Radcliffe Medal; in 1992 the Medal of the Collège de France; in June, 2000, the PEN Oakland literary award for excellence in multi-cultural literature, non-fiction, for *Splitting the Difference*; and in October, 2002, the Rose Mary Crawshay Prize from the British Academy, for the best book about English literature written by a woman, for *The Bedtrick*. The Graham School of the University of Chicago gave her the award for Excellence in Teaching in Graduate Studies in 2007, and she was awarded the Faculty Award for Excellence in Graduate Teaching and Mentoring by the University of Chicago, in 2012. The American Academy of Religion awarded her the 2008 Martin E. Marty Award for the Public Understanding of Religion. In 2012 she was awarded the Ramnath Goenka Award from the Express Group, India, for the best book, non-fiction for *The Hindus: An Alternative History*, which was also a finalist for the New York Book Critics Circle Award, in 2010. She has mentored over 70 students through their PhDs.

Professor Doniger's research and teaching interests revolve around two basic areas, Hinduism and mythology. Her courses in mythology address themes in cross-cultural expanses, such as death, dreams, evil, horses, sex, and women; her courses in Hinduism cover a broad spectrum that, in addition to mythology, considers literature, law, gender, and zoology.

Among over 40 books published under the names of Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty and Wendy Doniger are 17 interpretive works, including *Siva: The Erotic Ascetic*; *The Origins of Evil in Hindu Mythology*; *Women, Androgynes, and Other Mythical Beasts*; *Dreams, Illusion, and Other Realities*; *Tales of Sex and Violence: Folklore, Sacrifice, and Danger in the Jaiminiya Brahmana*; *Other Peoples' Myths: The Cave of Echoes*; *Splitting the Difference: Gender and Myth in Ancient Greece and India*; *The Bedtrick: Tales of Sex and Masquerade*; *The Implied Spider: Politics and Theology in Myth*; *The Woman Who Pretended To Be Who She Was*; *The Hindus: An Alternative History*; *On Hinduism*; and *Hinduism*, for the *Norton Anthology of World Religions*. Among her nine translations are three Penguin Classics—*Hindu Myths: A Sourcebook, Translated from the Sanskrit*; *The Rig Veda: An Anthology, 108 Hymns Translated from the Sanskrit*; and *The Laws of Manu* (with Brian K. Smith)—and a new translation of the *Kamasutra* (with Sudhir Kakar). In progress are *The Ring of Truth, And Other Myths of Sex and Jewelry; Resistance to Religion in Ancient India: The Hidden Transcript of the Sciences of Politics and Pleasure* (the 2014 Terry Lectures at Yale); and a novel, *Horses for Lovers, Dogs for Husbands*.

## INTRODUCTION

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Professor Wendy Doniger's 2015 Charles Homer Haskins Prize Lecture is the thirty-third in an annual series named for the first chairman of the American Council of Learned Societies. The Executive Committee of the Delegates of ACLS selects the prize winner and lecturer from the many worthy nominations put forward by our community.

The lecturer's charge is "to reflect on a lifetime of work as a scholar; on the motives, the chance determinations, the satisfactions (and the dissatisfactions) of the life of learning; and to explore through one's own life the larger, institutional life of scholarship. We do not wish the speaker to present the products of one's own scholarly research, but rather to share with other scholars the personal process of a particular lifetime of learning."

Professor Doniger's lifetime of learning has been a full and productive one, yielding more than 30 books and numerous articles and reviews. As the letter nominating her for tonight's honor noted: "Her lifetime of work as an historian of religion spans a time period ranging from the intellectual 'God is Dead' movement of the sixties to our current, acute awareness of the role religion plays in shaping lives, politics, and nations." In her studies of Sanskrit texts, mythology, and Hindu religious traditions, she has taken on the great challenge of the humanities: to make complex phenomena of human creativity meaningful across time, space, and language.

As one reviewer of her work noted, with Professor Doniger as a guide, "contemplating a myth allows one to look through both ends of the human kaleidoscope at once so as to identify personal commitments and problems while allowing us to see ways in which that myth is and is not our own story."<sup>1</sup> Her rigorous analyses and acute descriptions present to her readers what she has called "the dangerous gods of otherness"<sup>2</sup> without

flattening the rugged terrain of cultural variety. In the words of another reviewer, "Like Clifford Geertz, she tries to understand others, not to become them."<sup>3</sup>

Professor Doniger's engagement with the different forms of cultural expression began early: as a teenager she studied dance under George Balanchine and Martha Graham at the School of American Ballet. She has studied in India, the USSR, and the United Kingdom. She has served as president of two of our constituent societies, the American Academy of Religion and the Association of Asian Studies, and as a member of the ACLS Board of Directors. I had the pleasure of overlapping with her on the board for one year.

Professor Doniger is a teacher-scholar. Courses she has taught at the University of Chicago include "The Comparative Mythology of Evil," "Freud's Interpretation of Dreams," "The Doctrine of Illusion in Indian Literature," "The Kamasutra," "Sexual Doubles in Jewish and Christian Myth," "Problems in the History of Religions," and a series of courses on the Greek classics taught with David Grene and David Tracy. Her curriculum vitae lists 113 dissertation committees on which she has served as a reader, on 72 of which she was the advisor. That c.v., which runs to 47 pages listing degrees, awards, honors, lectures, and service (but not her publications, which are given in a separate file), offers this final cautionary comment: "Ars brevis, vita longa."

The new knowledge that comes from research can—indeed, will—be unsettling to many. Professor Doniger has needed all her evident wit and determination to persist with her probing scholarship in the face of threats and harassment from both anonymous and organized opponents offended by her explorations of sexuality in myth and religion. Her active public lecturing has given those opponents opportunities to throw eggs and shout insults. State power has been deployed against her writings. Last year, Penguin Books India settled a lawsuit filed in an Indian court by a retired school headmaster associated with a right-wing Hindu organization. The suit claimed that Professor Doniger's acclaimed title *The Hindus: An Alternative History*, pub-

lished in India by Penguin, violated a section of the Indian Penal Code prohibiting “malicious acts, intended to outrage religious feelings.” The suit charged that the book was “filthy and dirty,” giving undue attention to different Hindu approaches to sexuality. The publisher agreed to withdraw the book from circulation and pulp all remaining titles.

Writers and scholars in India and abroad protested Penguin’s settlement. Professor Doniger wryly noted that “You cannot ban a book in the age of the Internet,” and expressed the hope that there would be reconsideration of India’s blasphemy law. She was worried, however, that readers with prurient interests who bought a copy of *The Hindus* seeking explicit passages would not find much sex in the book, for that was not its subject. “It’s about religion,” she wrote in the *New York Times*, “which is much hotter than sex.”

We are grateful for her persistence and determination in speaking her mind and sharing her well-wrought research. Her example as a scholar, as a teacher, as a mentor, and as public intellectual enacts the enduring values of the academy.

—Pauline Yu, President  
American Council of Learned Societies

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Lindsey Harlan, rev. of *The Implied Spider: Politics and Theology in Myth*, by Wendy Doniger, *Church History: Studies in Christianity and Culture* 68.2 (1999): 530.

<sup>2</sup> Wendy Doniger O’Flaherty, *Other Peoples’ Myths* (NY: Macmillan, 1988) 110.

<sup>3</sup> Robert A. Segal, rev. of *Other Peoples’ Myths* by Wendy Doniger O’Flaherty, *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 60.4 (1992): 801.

WENDY DONIGER

## *A Life of Learning*

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It is a great honor to give the Charles Homer Haskins Prize Lecture, though it is also a tolling bell, since the understanding is that the Haskins Lecturer will look *back* upon "A Life of Learning," presumably tottering on the brink of the grave. But one of the advantages of being old (something to set in the scale against not being able to remember if you've taken your medications and not being able to go downstairs without holding onto the railing) is that you see the shape of your life quite differently. When you look back, the shape is not what you thought it would be when it was happening, or even when you looked back while still relatively young. Only quite recently have I come to understand that it was my mother, not my father, who gave me many of the qualities that have made possible the best parts of my life.

### **My Mother**

My life of learning, and of the love of learning, has been one of learning from books given in love. Most of what I learned came from someone I loved, beginning with my mother, Rita Doniger, born Rita Roth. She was a brilliant and talented woman, raised in Vienna *entre deux guerres*, a woman at ease in several languages and fluent in their literatures, a fine pianist, a Bauhaus-trained painter. The Depression and the Holocaust had brought her to New York and wrought havoc in her education; she never finished high school, a fact that she resented bitterly to her dying day. When I was still very young, perhaps six or seven, she gave me a copy of her favorite set of books, *Alice in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking Glass*, the latter, in my opinion, the greatest

Note: A video of Professor Doniger's lecture is available in the media collection on the ACLS website, at [www.acls.org](http://www.acls.org).

Daisy lived. I've always thought that the secret of Gatsby was that he was Jewish: his past was shady, he was known to have changed his name, and his business partner was an anti-semitically depicted unscrupulous old Jew named Meyer Wolfsheim. When Gatsby gazed across Manhasset Bay at the green light that illuminated the dock of Daisy's house, she and it were untenable because Jews could not buy property in Manhasset. Of course it was my mother who gave me a copy of *The Great Gatsby*.

### High School: The Class of 1958

My high school class was the class of 1958, but I mostly hung out with the class of 1956; I later actually married TWO of them, one at a time. We all read Fitzgerald, of course, but also Hemingway (especially *A Moveable Feast*) and Malcolm Cowley's *Exile's Return*, and even Henri Murger's *Scènes de La Vie Bohème*, hoping to become another Lost Generation. We all had grand plans; I was going to become a great ballet dancer (after years of studying with George Balanchine and Martha Graham, I gave it all up to study Sanskrit), my boyfriend Dennis was going to write the great American novel, and a guy named Francis Coppola, who



Painting of Wendy as a dancer, 1956, by Kenneth van Rensselaer

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Rita and Wendy, 1947

work of European mythology since Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. The Red Queen, who believed that she was always right about everything and brooked no disagreement, strongly reminded me of my mother; and the White Queen, who always cried out in pain *before* she pricked her finger, became for me, throughout my life, a way of resisting my own tendency to fall prey to paralyzing anxiety about things that might never happen.

*Through the Looking Glass* was also strongly influenced by Indian philosophy (a connection noted by Swami Vivekananda and other Vedantic philosophers). Think, after all, of the idea that we are all part of the dream of the White King. My mother was herself an amateur Orientalist, who had hung all over the house framed rubbings from Angkor Wat (she pronounced it An-gkor Vat, which I took to be its name until, much later, I began to read about it myself), and who later amassed a fine collection of Japanese netsukes and, still later, Indian Ganeshas. She gave me books about India. When I was about 12, she gave me E. M.

Forster's *A Passage to India*, which seared my soul. It's one of the books that I read in a single 24-hour binge, and that I remember exactly where I was when I read it: in my room in our house on the Long Island Sound. I stayed up all the hot, humid summer night, with all the windows open, listening to the crickets and the moaning of the foghorns in the Sound, and then to the birdsong in the morning. It made me want to study India, to go to India, to go into those caves that Forster described. I cited certain key insights and metaphors from Forster in my own books throughout the years.

And then, in 1954, when I was 13, my mother gave me a copy of Aubrey Menen's newly published, wickedly satirical retelling of the ancient Sanskrit epic, the *Ramayana*. I didn't know then that Menen's book had already been banned in India under Indian Penal Code 295A, and of course I could not know that I myself would run headlong into that same law over half a century later.

### Great Neck

Another important player in my early education was the town I grew up in, Great Neck, on the North Shore of Long Island, a half hour drive from Manhattan, or a 45 minute ride on the Long Island Rail Road to Penn Station, easily *of* New York, but not *in* it. For many years, Great Neck was one of the few towns on the North Shore where Jews could buy property; by that "Gentleman's Agreement" that Laura Hobson immortalized in her novel, and Gregory Peck in the film, most of the rest of the Island was "restricted." This meant that many of the talented and successful Jews who worked in Manhattan lived in Great Neck, Broadway comedians (Eddie Cantor, Sid Caesar), opera singers (Richard Tucker), composers (Morton Gould), musicians (Leonard Rose, Leonid Hambro, Bobby Mann, Sascha Schneider), Hollywood moguls (Bob Benjamin of United Artists) and writers (Irving Stone).

A greater writer, but one who was not Jewish, also lived in Great Neck from 1922 to 1924, F. Scott Fitzgerald, who wrote his finest novel about Great Neck, which he called West Egg; East Egg was the next peninsula, Manhasset, where the unattainable

Daisy lived. I've always thought that the secret of Gatsby was that he was Jewish: his past was shady, he was known to have changed his name, and his business partner was an anti-semitically depicted unscrupulous old Jew named Meyer Wolfsheim. When Gatsby gazed across Manhasset Bay at the green light that illuminated the dock of Daisy's house, she and it were unattainable because Jews could not buy property in Manhasset. Of course it was my mother who gave me a copy of *The Great Gatsby*.

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Painting of Wendy as a dancer, 1956, by Kenneth van Rensselaer

has since gone on record as saying that I was the first girl he ever kissed, dreamt of becoming a great film director.

But some of the Great Neckers (as we were called) who became famous were in my own class of 1958: Pulitzer Prize winners Steven Albert and Bernard Pomerance (*The Elephant Man*), the great Mozart expert Neil Flax, and television correspondent Bob Simon, who survived 40 days in prison in Baghdad and then died in a car crash in Manhattan just this past February 11, 2015. Another member of my class was Barbara Stoler Miller, who, like me, earned a PhD in Sanskrit in 1968, became a full professor, and was elected president of the Association of Asian Studies (she in 1990, I in 1998). What sort of odds would you give that the class of 1958 at Great Neck High School would yield two women who were, for quite a while, the only two American women with university chairs in Sanskrit? Something in the water? (She, too, married a Great Neck boy, though just one.) Barbara and I were not friends in high school: she wore cashmere sweater sets in pastel colors, with pearls, while I wore existentialist black, with jewelry made of bits of rough rock and hunks of wood, which I bought in Greenwich Village. But many years later, when Barbara became ill with cancer, we did, finally, become friends, very close friends, until her death in 1993.

### High School Teachers

It was not, I think, something in the water or in the air in Great Neck that produced such over-achievers in those years; it was something in the school, the teachers. Over the years, I've often asked people of unusual accomplishments, "How did you get started doing what you do?" And so very often the answer begins, "I had a teacher in High School . . ." I had two. The first was Miss Lilenfeld, Anita Lilenfeld (now Seligson), who taught me Latin, and then, informally, a bit of Greek, and one day suggested that, given my interest in India and in old languages, I might try Sanskrit.

The other great teacher was Jack Fields, my English teacher and sponsor of the school newspaper, the *Guidepost*, of which I served as the Features editor and in which I published

several now truly embarrassing short stories, written in a style compounded of Hemingway and the King James Bible. But one of those stories already plays upon themes that were to haunt my academic writing forever after; it was about masquerade and inequality, about the dilemma of a black man who passed as white, only to fall in love with a black woman who would not marry him because she thought he was white.

I began to get into trouble because of my writing even then: I was chosen to be the valedictorian of our graduating class, and in my graduation speech I urged forgiveness of the Germans. A number of parents in the overwhelmingly Jewish and anti-German audience (a congregation that had insisted that the Rabbi of Temple Beth-el send back his Volkswagen—it was just 13 years after the end of World War II) wrote or phoned the principal to protest, and Jack Fields, who had helped me with the speech, took a lot of heat. On an earlier occasion when I had gotten into trouble and was made to stay after school for several hours for a week or so, Jack Fields and Anita Lilienfeld kept me company; we played bridge.

Jack Fields continued to encourage me to write and corrected my more egregious errors, a habit he found hard to drop. Many years later, when he saw a book review I had published in the *New York Times*, he wrote to congratulate me, telling me how he had followed my career with great interest, how proud he was of me, and how much he had enjoyed the *Times* piece—though it would have been even better had I left out the first paragraph, and indeed in the second paragraph . . . Old English teachers never die.

### **The Red Diaper: Communism in High School**

Peter Camejo was a rather different sort of embryonic celebrity from the Great Neck class of 1958. He was the president of the Great Neck chapter of the World Communist Youth organization; years later, he ran for governor of California on the Green Party ticket and in 2004 was Ralph Nader's running mate. I knew him

well; I was vice-president of the Great Neck chapter of the World Communist Youth organization.

I was a Red Diaper baby; my mother was not just a devout Communist, but a Stalinist. She was a Communist simply because she believed that the rich should be forced to share their wealth with the poor. She never actually joined the Party, because she couldn't bear to have *anyone* ever tell her what to do, and she knew they'd throw her out the first time she became Bolshy, as it were. I grew up thinking that "Trotskyite" was a general term of abuse, and it was not until I went to kindergarten that I learned that there was such a thing as paper white on both sides; I had done my early drawings on the backs of flyers for Henry Wallace and Ella Winter and Russian War Relief, later Alger Hiss, and still later, the Rosenbergs. During the McCarthy Era, people like Pete Seeger and Zero Mostel drifted in and out of our house; I learned my first Sanskrit words from Pete Seeger, in Gandhi's song, "Raghupati Raghava."

My father, Lester Doniger, had come to America from the village of Raczki, in the Polish corridor, in 1920, and worked his way through a degree in English literature at NYU night school, where Irwin Edman and Thomas Wolfe were among his teachers. He had become a very successful publisher. As he was a staunch FDR man, later a Stevenson man, there were often violent arguments at the dinner table; napkins were thrown down, plates pushed away only half touched. He had worked with the *New York Times* and published reference works, and so he would come back to the table with some such text and read out the figures—how many people Stalin had murdered, or something of that sort—only to hear my mother reply, "Well, if you believe those Capitalist rags." I learned then that there are some arguments you cannot win.

My mother also felt that the world would not be fit to live in until the last rabbi was strangled with the entrails of the last priest. When, in 1954, under McCarthy, the phrase "under God" was inserted in the pledge of allegiance, she wouldn't let me say it, and I had to go and sit in the principal's office each day during the assembly in which all the other children said the pledge of

allegiance. In 1991, a few months before she died, Adam Phillips did an NPR program about me, and interviewed her too. At one point he asked her how, given her views of religion, she felt about the fact that I made my living writing about religious texts. She laughed and turned to me and said, “But you don’t believe any of it, do you?”

### To Change the World

My mother was a Communist because she wanted to change the world, to do good in the world, and she bequeathed that ambition to me. But where it made her hate pious people, who bombed abortion clinics and took books out of libraries, it made me admire the religious activists, the ones who fought in the Civil Rights movement and fed the poor (my mother was against charity on principle: if there were a just division of wealth, you wouldn’t need soup kitchens). For a long time I wanted to be a nun, and nurse the lepers; I watched Audrey Hepburn in *The Nun’s Story* (1959) over and over. (I had not yet heard Barbra Streisand ask, “Would a convent take a Jewish girl?”) But years later, when I confessed my childhood ambition to a friend who had actually been a nun, she remarked, “Well, you’d have made a great Mother Superior, but you never could have worked your way up through the ranks.”) In the end, like Audrey Hepburn, like my mother, I could not submit to the idea of obedience, and the nun became, like the ballet dancer, a road not taken. Instead, I threw myself into the world of political activism.

### Fleeing from My Mother to Ancient India

But by the end of high school I had burnt out. I no longer thought that Communism could fix the world. I didn’t think anything could fix the world, and I was tired of the political arguments that could never be won. From my mother’s political activism I fled to my father’s profession of publishing, trading in my red diaper for a red pencil. He made books, while my mother collected books, particularly first editions. I wanted to be like him and not like her. She recycled and composted long before anyone else did, which the neighbors complained about, and she dressed



Lester and Wendy, 1952



Painting of Wendy  
by Harvey Haines,  
1946

me (and herself) in trousers that she made herself, which I hated, as all the other girls wore store-bought skirts. She never did what other people did, which embarrassed me. We fought like cats, my mother and I. My father wore elegant suits from Brooks Brothers and bought me dresses from Saks Fifth Avenue. I was Daddy's girl.

Within his world of books I fled—more precisely, fled back—to the fantasy world, for fantasy was a place in which I had always felt at home; documentary proof of this is supplied by a life-sized oil portrait of me that was made (by my uncle Harvey, a failed portrait painter) when I was about six years old; I am holding a fairy-tale castle, and beside me is an open book in which you can read the words, *Once Upon A Time*. And within that world I fled to ancient India, which seemed as long ago and far away as I could possibly get.

### **Radcliffe**

Sanskrit was also another kind of refuge for me, a refuge from the intense ambition and competitiveness that was bred into me, as it was into so many children of Jewish refugees, and exacerbated in my case by my mother's own frustrated intellectual ambitions, which she visited upon me, to use the Biblical phrase. I had become burnt out by the pressure, in high school, to excel in all of my studies, to get the kind of grades that got a Jewish girl into Radcliffe. I guessed, rightly as it turned out, that I would have no competition if I studied Sanskrit, and this, too, was a source of welcome respite from the fray. And so I did the right thing for some of the right reasons and some of the wrong reasons, and began the study of Sanskrit at Radcliffe when I was 17.

At Radcliffe, I fled almost literally to the pinnacle of the ivory tower, for the Sanskrit room at Harvard was at the very top of Widener Library, Widener A, so far up that the window opened directly onto the flat roof, and during class I could see the pigeons waddling around right at the level of the windowsill, their cooing a kind of background music for my recitations. I had become an old-fashioned Orientalist *femme de cabinet*, and my *cabinet* was

Widener A, its dusty air perfumed with the sweet, slightly moldy smell of old Indian books. This heavenly sky-walking was balanced by the other half of my intellectual work, down in the dark rows of the Widener stacks, where on some occasions, finding what I was looking for or something even better that I had not even intended to look for, I actually broke out into a sweet sweat of excitement.

I studied Sanskrit with the great Daniel Henry Holmes Ingalls, who taught me not only Sanskrit but Indian literature, Indian history, and Indian religion—he was a one-man band for Indian culture. He also taught me something else, harder to define, something about the pleasure of scholarship, the elegance of the written word, the luxury of the world of the mind. He told me once that he regarded it as a waste of time to educate women, since they just got married and had children, but he continued to teach me generously and to encourage me to go on with my studies. He had me read Kalidasa's great poem, *Kumarasambhava*, "The Birth of the Prince," an elegant poetic riff on the story of the marriage of the god Shiva and the goddess Parvati. But Ingalls also told me that the same story was narrated in the Puranas, a far simpler, sloppier, popular form of Sanskrit, which the highbrow, high-born Ingalls (his family owned the Homestead Inn in West Virginia, which was restricted—no Jews allowed) regarded as the equivalent of pulp fiction. To his horror, I much preferred the Puranas to the court poetry, and this was a turning point in my academic life: I had found my level, as a lowbrow Sanskritist, a rare crossbreed. I wrote my PhD dissertation on the myths of Shiva in the Puranas, and it eventually became my first book, *Shiva: The Erotic Ascetic*.

So I was trained as a Sanskritist. But I was not a *real* Sanskritist; real Sanskritists (Ingalls was not at all typical) are cold-blooded pedants interested only in verbs and nouns, and I was a hot-blooded ex-ballet dancer still interested in stories. *Real* Sanskritists, on several continents, have been known to turn and leave a room when I entered it. I looked elsewhere for my intellectual nourishment. I roomed with an anthropologist, Alice Kasakoff, whom the Radcliffe authorities had assigned to me on

the very first day; in those times of unspoken quotas, Jewish girls somehow just seemed to end up with Jewish roommates. Alice introduced me to her colleagues and instilled in me an enduring admiration for anthropologists. I also, in the manner of old-fashioned Sanskritists and "Orientalists," studied Greek with Zeph Stewart, Sterling Dow, John Finley and Adam Parry; English literature with Reuben Brower, William Alfred, and Harry Levin; and folklore with Albert Lord.

One problem arose at the start of my freshman year: I read very slowly, always have, and so I flunked the speed-reading test that Radcliffe gave us all as we entered, and I was advised to take the speed-reading course that was offered every day at a time when no one had classes, something like 5:00 a.m. Of course I didn't take it—I liked reading slowly, going back to reread earlier passages in the light of later ones, looking up from the page to think my own thoughts about the text—and Radcliffe continued to send me notices strongly advising me to mend my ways, as this disability might well cause me to fail at Radcliffe. In those days before computers, they sent the notices by mail, and to save postage they sent the note out at the end of the semester, in the same envelope in which they sent my grades, which remained straight A's throughout my time there. Even in the very last semester, when the envelope also contained the information that I would graduate *summa cum laude* and win the Jonathan Fay Prize, they included the little notice severely chastising me for failing to learn to read properly.

### My Passage to India

When I went on to graduate school at Harvard, my life as a Sanskritist floated on in its tiny, unstructured paradise: no PhD qualifying exams, no need to fill out long application forms for grants; the relatively few people who applied to go to India were more or less automatically financed. (The jaws of my students drop when I tell them about all this.) In 1963, Ingalls sent me to India to work with Rajendra Chandra Hazra, the world expert on the Puranas. Upon arriving in Calcutta, and checking in at the Ramakrishna

Mission, I duly wrote to Hazra and then went to see him; he gave me tea and said that he couldn't work with a woman. And that was the end of my training as a Sanskritist in India. I spent that year beginning to get to know India in reality, after all those years of fantasy. I went up to Shantiniketan in the Bengal countryside and learned to speak Bengali and to sing Tagore songs and to dance in the Manipuri tradition; I went down to Madras and studied Bharat Natyam with the great Balasarasvati. I went back up to Calcutta and met Ali Akbar Khan, who helped me buy a sarod and taught me to play it. I went to the Kailasa temple at Ellora and the erotic temples of Khajuraho and the temple of the sun at Konarak and the caves of Shiva on the island of Elephanta and the great frieze by the sea at Mahabalipuram. I rode camels in Jaisalmer and elephants in Ajmer and trains everywhere, sleeping on the upper berths of trains or on the floor in the Third Class Ladies' Waiting Room at the stations. And all of it, including my round-trip airfare from New York, on \$6,000 from the Ameri-



Rita and Wendy in India at Mahabalipuram, 1964

can Institute of Indian Studies, with money left over to buy the complete critical editions of the *Mahabharata*, the *Ramayana*, the *Rig Veda*, every Purana that had ever been published, and a three-foot high solid bronze statue of the goddess Parvati, from the Vijayanagar period. My mother came to visit me in India and went on to see "Angkor Vat" at last (in 1964, with the war already breaking out in Cambodia—nothing could stop my mother), a trip that she later recalled as the high point of her entire life.

I flew up to Kathmandu, and in the little plane as we crossed the Himalayas I found that I was seated next to Penelope Chetwode, who was uncannily like the Red Queen, or, if you prefer, my mother. She had grown up in "Inja" as the daughter of the Commander in Chief and had now returned, she said, to learn Hindi; when I asked, Hadn't she learned it as a child living in Delhi?, she replied, without the slightest hint of humor, "Yes, but then we only learned the imperatives of all the verbs." This was the beginning of a beautiful friendship, which we renewed just two years later, in 1965, when I moved, following my husband, to Oxford. Penelope taught me to ride Arabian horses up on the Berkshire Downs and also taught me a great deal about India under the Raj. In later years I found it difficult, though not impossible, to defend my politically incorrect love of the English, and my even more incorrect love of the English in India, among my South Asian academic colleagues dominated by subaltern studies and postcolonial studies.

### Oxford

In Oxford, during intervals from riding on the Downs, I eventually wrote a DPhil dissertation with Robin Zaehner, whose supervision consisted entirely in taking me out once a year to a very good dinner at the Elizabethan Restaurant, right above the shop that Lewis Carroll had immortalized as the Sheep's Shop, and giving me increasingly drunken bits of what turned out to be very good advice about my subject, the concept of heresy in Hinduism. Zaehner at that time was obsessed with Charles Manson, about whom he was writing a book (*Our Savage God*), and it took a great deal of effort on my part to keep Manson and Aristotle, another



Wendy and Rita in Oxford, 1973

obsession of Zaehner's, out of my dissertation, which eventually became my second book, *The Origins of Evil in Hindu Mythology*.

The Sanskrit dream world continued to work its magic. I never had a job interview; I just seemed to meet people and they offered me jobs. (Again, my students' jaws drop.) Christoph von Furer-Haimendorf (an anthropologist) wanted to hire me to teach in the School of Oriental and African Studies, where he was acting as director; finding it impossible to sell me to the Sanskritists, he winkled me instead into the History Department, where Bernard Lewis welcomed me and protected me from the Sanskritists, and Ken Ballhatchet taught me some history.

As a teacher, still despairing of ever changing the world, I settled instead for a chance to mend it bird by bird, stone by stone—*tikkun olam*, as the Hebrew expression puts it—through small, random acts of kindness, as a teacher, scholar, and writer. I remained alienated from the world of action—politics, reform, marching in protest—but deeply committed to my non-actions, my trivial, personal acts, with great passion for helping each student,

writing each book. To this day, my idea of perfect happiness is to sit in a quiet, beautiful place and write, with my dog at my feet.

In my decade in Oxford, my father became an important influence on my writing. He was, after all, a successful publisher, a man who knew how to read a manuscript and make it better; he read everything I wrote (I sent him all my notes from India), and invariably loved it. (My mother, her envy of my academic achievements finally getting its nose in front in the race with her pride in those same achievements, never read anything that I wrote, though she kept all of my books by her bedside until the day she died. Perhaps she did read them and never told me.) My father died in 1971, while I was pregnant with my son Michael, whom my father knew was on the way. A combination of post-partum depression and grieving for my father put me into the Warneford Hospital (first named the Oxford Lunatic Asylum in 1826, later the Warneford Lunatic Asylum). They actually still did basket weaving there, and when I protested that it was a waste of my time, they let me bring in my typewriter, and there I wrote much of my book on evil in Hindu mythology, while working through my own first personal experience of radical evil. Eventually I was discharged by a wise psychiatrist, a Holocaust survivor, who had once told me, "If you commit suicide now, you'll be sorry later," and assured me, as I left and asked her if she thought I'd end up back there again, "I think you will never again experience simultaneously the death of your father and the birth of your first son." And she was right.

My father remains my ideal, imagined reader to this day; he was always on my side. His voice, still strong in my ears, encourages me to take risks, to have confidence that I will find some readers who will get my jokes, love the stories that I love, and respect my opinions even when they do not share them. I sound out every line I write, imagining the reader reading it, and never imagining as the reader certain scholars, who shall remain nameless, who might be watching with an eagle eye, poised to pounce on any mistake I might make; no, I always imagine the reader as my father, on my side. I try to be that person to my stu-

dents, who are otherwise vulnerable to an *imaginaire* of hostile reception that can block their writing, as it keeps some of my most brilliant colleagues from publishing. My father saved me from that.

The distrust of argument that had been bred in me at my parents' contentious dinner table made me, in my own work, very non-confrontational. In this I took after my father, who may have learned the same lesson in the same place but was also, I think, by nature a man who wanted everyone to like him. In personal encounters, I would always go around an opponent rather than try to go through. I would refuse to write a review of a book I didn't like. But I didn't want to write about what other people wrote about; the maternal genes in me were also quietly working their magic there. I would express my dissident opinions, but only on my own turf; if I read in a book something that I thought wrong, that ignored texts that revealed another aspect of the subject, the "wrong" book would inspire me to write the "right" book, using those neglected texts to make my own point. If the dominant paradigm was that the karma theory solved everything and that the Hindu gods were always loving and truthful, I wrote about the many alternative narratives that had been advanced by Hindus who did not think that karma was the answer, and the many myths in which the gods were deceitful or hurtful.

In England, though Richard Gombrich was my companion in arms in the world of Sanskrit, it was again the anthropologists who supplied much of my intellectual nourishment—E. E. Evans-Pritchard and Rodney Needham in Oxford, Edmund Leach in Cambridge, Mary Douglas in London, and, later, Claude Lévi-Strauss. I first encountered the works of Lévi-Strauss in Moscow, where I had accompanied my husband, a Russian historian, for a year (1970-71) at the height of the Cold War, under Brezhnev. While my husband was burrowing in the archives, I wandered over to the Oriental Institute and discovered the structuralists and semioticians of the Tartu school. (This was the only time in my life when I found Sanskrit of practical use: since all the Moscow Sanskritists I knew were dissidents, the Sanskrit library at the

Oriental Institute was bugged; we met there and spoke what amounted to pidgin Sanskrit to baffle the KGB eavesdroppers.)

Later I met Lévi-Strauss in person, in Paris, and we corresponded until his death. Among the many things I learned from him was an answer to the puzzle of the proliferation and repetition of myths: that each version addresses a paradox that can never be solved, and so you try again, and again, and again; this also showed me the way to deal with the apparent paradox of Shiva's asceticism and eroticism. On a more practical level, Lévi-Strauss's structural patterns provided me with a way to discuss hundreds of variants of a myth at once, instead of printing them out in a large, separate volume, as I had done for my 950-page Harvard dissertation. And Lévi-Strauss also showed me the best resolution of the senseless arguments advanced to explain the coincidence of myths across cultures, borrowing versus independent origination: he reasoned that one culture borrows from another only those things that are attractive and sensible to the receiving culture, hence in a sense original in that culture too. This validation of the link between versions of a myth in several cultures justified, I felt, my persistence in writing about cross-cultural patterns of myth, a subject that had fallen into disrepute in my academic world.

### Chicago

When, in 1975, I followed my husband back from England to Berkeley (giving up my tenured lectureship at the School of Oriental and African Studies), again an anthropologist, Alan Dundes, was my best friend (indeed almost my only friend; I was spurned by the Berkeley South Asianists). Only when I reached my final academic home, the University of Chicago, in 1978, did I find Indologists broad-minded enough to welcome me in—Hans van Buitenen, Milton Singer, A. K. Ramanujan, the Rudolphs, Ed Dimock, Kim Marriott—though even there, the historians of religions Mircea Eliade and Frank Reynolds were in many ways my closest colleagues and my first teachers in the field of the history of religions.

I came to Chicago under colors even more false than those I had worn as a historian in London. In 1968, Mircea Eliade had been the only official reader (besides Ingalls) of my PhD dissertation (again, the jaws drop); he had liked it, and published two long essays from it in the journal that he had just founded (in 1961), *History of Religions*, of which I now serve as the senior editor. Eliade encouraged me to come to Chicago. Ten years later, in 1978, I accepted the offer of Eliade's colleague, the dean of the Divinity School, Joe Kitagawa, and arrived in Chicago as a full professor and chair of the History of Religions Area, having taken only one course in religion in my whole life (and that one from the highly eccentric Arthur Darby Nock). I was able to hold my imposter nightmares at bay only by reassuring myself that I was, at least, a real South Asianist, and I had an appointment in that department too.

But I also had an appointment in the Committee on Social Thought, which changed my life. In those days, the Committee was a truly motley group (nowadays the term would be interdisciplinary) of people who called themselves a *salon des refusés*—maverick anthropologists, art historians, historians of religions, Islamicists, Sinologists (one was the chair), Indologists, novelists (Saul Bellow), musicologists (Charles Rosen), classicists, economists, historians of religion (Eliade was there, too)—all of them slightly out of step with their own official academic caste and very, very good at whatever they did. I thought I had died and gone to heaven. All of them, but particularly David Grene, encouraged me to draw upon everything I knew, not just what I had been certified to know, in my writing and teaching, and so I gained the courage to rush in where classicists and scholars of English literature, film, Freud, and feminism feared to tread. Never again would I write *only* about India, and never again would I have to apologize for not being a real Sanskritist. The nourishment I drew from supportive colleagues in such a wide range of academic disciplines is reflected in the rather eclectic nature of the work I did then and have continued to do. The ugly duckling had become a swan—or, to quote one of my own favorite myths, I had become the woman who pretended to be what she was.

## Writing

Though it was my high school teacher Jack Fields who first taught me to write, his torch was later taken up by a series of great editors—Betty Radice, editor of the Penguin Classics, who taught me to respect the reader who did not know Sanskrit; then Philip Lilienthal, director of the University of California Press, who cut short my endless revisions by giving me a little plaque for my desk on which was written, “Save it For the Next Edition”; then, at the University of Chicago Press, several rather old-fashioned women who not only picked every nit in my text but whose ominous words “See Over” invariably slapped my wrist with a short, pithy essay, written in an exquisite hand, on some point of grammar or style that I had butchered. Morris Philipson, director of the Press, could always sort out the chaff from the wheat in everything that I wrote. Cynthia Read at Oxford University Press tolerated most but not all of my most egregious puns and could pierce the balloon of a “blowsy” paragraph at 20 paces. And finally I owe so much to my great and courageous Indian publisher Ravi Singh (known as Ravishing to his authors), whose careful editing side-stepped many potential political battles but who stood staunchly beside me in the ones we could not avoid.

I seem to chain smoke my books, lighting each from the embers of the last, or, if you prefer, making new yogurt from a bit of yogurt from the last batch. Each book left something unsolved, unsatisfied, and that drove me on to the next; the leftovers from the Shiva book (in which the god violates many of the Hindu codes of chastity and caste purity) spilled over to make the book about the origins of evil (in which other gods, too, break their own rules). Some of the stories about Sita and Helen in *Splitting the Difference* turned out to be bedtricks, and demanded a book of their own; some of the bedtricks turned out to be self-masquerades, and demanded a book of their own; some of the self-masquerades were about rings, and that's where I am now, finishing up *The Ring of Truth, and Other Myths of Sex and Jewelry*. The red thread through all of them seems to be the intersecting themes of rebellion and masquerade. More recently, I have been drawn away from masquerade, and into rebellion.

## The Work I Have Always Done: Whom I Write For

I have always felt that what I do is translation, both in the literal sense (translating Sanskrit texts into English for Penguin Classics and Oxford World Classics and the late lamented Clay Sanskrit Series) and in the broader sense of translating India for Americans. I went to India through the magic door not in any wardrobe but in the Widener stacks (and, later, the Regenstein stacks at the University of Chicago), and emerged to lay at the feet of my friends and colleagues not the silk carpets and brass statues, the bright colors, the lovely carvings, the aesthetic of gorgeousness and the work of skilled hands, but stories. For of all the beautiful things that are made in India, the stories are the most beautiful of all.

In 1987, the Brooklyn Academy of Music inaugurated its Majestic Theatre with a production of Peter Brook's stage version of the *Mahabharata*, an all-night, nine-hour production for which my old Great Neck classmate Barbara Stoler Miller had served as the Sanskrit advisor. Watching the Brooklyn audience, my people, watching the Indian characters, the heroes of the *Mahabharata*, my people, I felt as I had felt introducing a new boyfriend to my parents, hoping so much that they would like him. I was delighted that my fellow New York Jews (and others) stayed up all night for an Indian play (as Indian audiences often do) and adored it. I was similarly delighted when my American students and, after a while, scholars and non-scholars in the broader world of letters liked my translations of Indian stories. Eventually I discovered that I had a very appreciative Indian audience as well, both in America and in India; most of my books were co-published in Indian editions. Yet it has only been recently that I've taught myself to stop assuming a New Yorker as my reader, so that I no longer say "we" (in contrast with "Hindus"), just as I had to learn to stop using "he" as the default pronoun.

I never ever imagined a pious, self-righteous Hindu as my reader. It never occurred to me that I could possibly make anyone mad at me by writing, full of appreciation, about Sanskrit texts whose authors had been dead for thousands of years. How foolish I was.

## The Problem Now With (Some) Hindus

And so, in 2003, the hostile response to my books from the right-wing Hindu community blind-sided me. After all those happy years of pure fantasy, both in my subject matter and, I now realize, in my own self-perception, suddenly I found myself fighting against real live bad guys again, just as I had done standing beside my mother in the barricades in the McCarthy days. Indeed, the seed of my problems may have been sown way back in 1954, when my mother gave me that copy of Aubrey Menen's satire on the *Ramayana* that was banned for its blasphemous attitude to the god Rama. And so began what I have come to think of as my Indian wars.

Attacks began first in the Hindu diaspora in America, in the early years of the twenty-first century, and then in India. First came assaults on other peoples' books, and then on mine and those of some of my students. The attackers, in both India and the American diaspora, were members of a movement called Hindutva, "Hinduness," a nationalist group with roots in the early twentieth century, who aim to restrict discussions of Hinduism to their own narrow, bowdlerized version of this rich and often earthy tradition, and who grotesquely misrepresent its history. They therefore care very much about what I was saying about people who had died thousands of years ago.

My response was, as always, tempered by the memory of those old, unwinnable dinnertime Stalin arguments; I did not engage in a direct confrontation with the off-the-wall Internet tirades. Instead, I stayed on my own turf and published, in 2010, a book, *The Hindus: An Alternative History*, highlighting, more clearly and directly, I hoped, precisely those elements that they wanted to erase: the earthier, often satirical stories of the gods, the skeptical and even antinomian arguments, the less than pious folk versions of the great myths, the criticisms of caste and protests against the mistreatment of women. Almost immediately, a Hindutva group brought a lawsuit against me and Penguin Books, India, demanding that my book be withdrawn from publication

and all remaining copies destroyed. Penguin's lawyers fought the suit for four years and finally settled in 2014, agreeing to the demands (though in fact no copy was destroyed, or "pulped," despite the media claims: all remaining copies were quickly bought out). To my surprise, there was a massive, international protest. The book became a *cause célèbre*, "the Doniger affair." Demonized by the Indian right, I became the poster girl of the Indian left. When the dust settled, Penguin generously agreed to let the Indian publication rights revert to me, and the book—which continued to be available illegally, in brown paper wrappers and in PDFs on the Internet, and legally but expensively (Penguin India now imports the New York edition)—is soon to be republished in India by another Indian publisher. My response to the attacks on *The Hindus* was to publish another book, this time a 700-page sourcebook, the *Norton Anthology of Hinduism*, bringing together the texts that proved that I wasn't making it all up.

And so, in the end, I was dragged *bei den Haarn*, as my mother would have said, "by the hair," back to the world of politics from which I had fled half a century ago. I was reminded of the man who, living in Europe in the 1930s, realized that there was going to be a terrible war there and decided to get out while he could; he sold all his possessions and fled to the safety of a remote island in the South Seas. It was Iwo Jima. The tale of the Appointment in Samarra also comes to mind: running into what you are running away from. Or Alice, trying to get to the garden and always coming back into the house. Here I was, fighting the good fight after all. Well, I had been trained to do it. I was a bit rusty, but I still knew what to do when the bad guys tried to shut you up: keep talking. I realized that I had to fight what my students couldn't fight, because they were vulnerable in ways that I was not: they might be denied visas to India, their books turned down by nervous publishers, their employers pressured—by wealthy, conservative Hindu donors—to fire them. But I, being near the end of my career, had nothing to lose. Was I a Sanskritist in political activist's clothing, or the reverse?

## Becoming My Mother

When I entered the fray in India, fighting for my book but also fighting for Penguin, for all publishers, in a way, my reflexive thought was that my father was standing me in good stead; no, said my son Mike, grandma is standing by you.

Suddenly I found that I was living my mother's life after all. Like a character in the recognition narratives I wrote about, like Cinderella, or Oedipus, I realized who I was: not my father, but my mother. More precisely, I had become not my mother but what she wanted me to become, and what she herself would have wanted to become had she had the chances that she had given me, starting with those first books given with love. Recognizing the seed of my present moment in her hopes for me so long ago, I thought, as I did so often, of the words at the end of Gatsby: "Gatsby believed in the green light, the orgiastic future that year by year recedes before us. It eluded us then, but that's no matter—tomorrow we will run faster, stretch out our arms farther....And one fine morning—So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past."